

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

0821
A83F6
op. 3

U. S. Department of Agriculture
Office of the Secretary

Advance for Release 9:30 A.M. EST
Friday, Jan. 20, 1978

Through most of history, the human struggle for food has been directed mostly at getting enough to eat. This led to government food policies that focused on increased production, better means of preservation, and improved systems for transportation and distribution.

Today, we have achieved a high degree of success in satisfying our domestic needs for adequate production, preservation, and distribution. Out of these successes, new and troubling issues arise.

Today production is so large and so reliable that we are able to feed ourselves and a large portion of the rest of the world and use food sales to help balance trade deficits. But this also means that we have recurring surpluses and that producers have trouble surviving.

Remarks prepared for delivery by Carol Tucker Foreman, Assistant Secretary, Food and Consumer Services, U.S. Department of Agriculture, at Consumer Assembly '78, Consumer Federation of America, Capital Hilton Hotel, Washington, D.C., Friday, January 20, 1978

Today, millions of Americans are still unable to get enough to eat without assistance. But millions of others suffer nutritional problems as a result of eating too much.

Today, we have been overwhelmingly successful in using chemicals to increase production, retard spoilage and preserve foods. But now we must be concerned with the health effects of the chemicals themselves.

Today, we have become so dependent upon food processing and upon nationwide food distribution systems that the farm value of production bears little relationship to the final price of food.

We are forging a new food policy--a policy that responds to the dilemmas facing us today. The changes began one year ago.

We are working toward a food policy that has nutrition as its first goal.

(More)

Secretary Bob Bergland has said, "We need to develop a nutrition policy and build our food and farm policy on it, rather than the other way around."

The goal of this new policy is to make available an adequate supply of safe, nutritious food at stable, reasonable prices -- while providing a fair return to farmers, processors and retailers, and decent wages to workers in the industry. The new policy must provide assistance to those at home and abroad who cannot afford the cost of a nutritious diet.

The proof of the Agriculture Department's commitment to a food and nutrition policy is not in proclaiming it, but in doing it. Under the Carter Administration, we have acted on that commitment.

First, we proposed, and Congress enacted, major reforms in the Food Stamp program. For over 10 years, you and others have advocated elimination of the purchase requirement for food stamps. Soon, more than 3 million of the very poorest Americans, previously unable to get food stamps because they couldn't afford to buy them, will have access to the program.

(More)

Second, we have begun to put into practical use our view that a balanced diet of non-gimmicky food is the best source of adequate nutrition:

For example:

--We vetoed the use of a fortified milk drink in the school snack program.

--We have proposed to ban fortified pastries from the school breakfast program.

--We have proposed to make school lunches more nutritious and more palatable.

Third, last year, because of USDA support, legislation to ban junk food from school vending machines was enacted. Next month we will list in the Federal Register the foods that we propose to prohibit.

This is only a beginning. When the Federal Budget is released, you will see the commitment continued and expanded.

(More)

The budget will include funds for television spots promoting good nutrition, and a major expansion of the WIC program that feeds low-income pregnant and nursing women, and young children.

There also will be a substantial increase in USDA support for human nutrition research. We must know how nutritional needs differ for people of various age, sex, racial and ethnic groups, lifestyles and locations. We must know more, too, about the relationship of diet to disease. And, we must know more about the nutritional consequences of our increasing reliance on convenience foods, processed foods, and food eaten away from home.

At lunch today, we will hear Lou Harris describe his landmark survey of public attitudes about consumer activists. One finding was especially interesting to me. Respondents were asked where consumer activists should concentrate their attention in the future. There were 30 or so industries to choose among. When the responses were tallied, food manufacturing led the list.

Food manufacturing also needs the attention of government. The Agriculture Department must play an active role in keeping food safe and of high quality, and in preventing economic adulteration.

(More)

We have begun to act after 7 years of dedicated non-action on the issue, the Agriculture Department is moving on the use of nitrites in the meat supply. Meat packers have until March 16 to prove they can put nitrites in bacon without forming cancer-causing nitrosamines.

Once again, the unfinished agenda is long. It includes dealing with the risks of microbial contamination in mechanically tenderized and vacuum packaged meat, and reducing salmonella contamination in poultry and sulfa residues in swine.

Some of the action we take to protect food safety may have the effect of slightly decreasing shelf life and increasing prices. But tainted food is no bargain at any price.

The fact that safety actions may create pressures for higher prices means that we must be more vigilant than ever in increasing competition, and reducing fraud and waste, in the food system.

In addition to its food safety roles, the Food Safety and Quality Service has important responsibilities to protect your pocketbook from those who attempt to defraud the consumer when he buys meat and poultry products.

(More)

We are attempting to carry out those responsibilities. We responded to your petitions to improve our net weight labeling regulations. For years, consumers have sought drained weight labeling for food products. Our proposed regulation will require drained weight labeling for meat and poultry.

In his campaign, Jimmy Carter promised to restore faith in the integrity of government. Making net weights more accurate is a small step in that direction. But dealing with outright corruption is the harshest of tests for any government agency. Although most meat packers and most meat graders are honest, we have had corruption in the meat grading system.

For example, in California and Arizona, 17 meat packing firms and 36 meat packing officials were indicted on charges of bribing meat graders. Most of them signed consent orders last year that should keep them in line. Some closed down. Seventeen USDA officials were indicted and convicted.

Since early 1975, it has been necessary to take administrative actions against meat packers in South Dakota, Iowa, Kansas and Texas because of the illegal removal of grade stamps from meats.

(More)

We have had these and other cases of corruption because the meat grading system has incentives for corruption built in.

Last fall, we took a number of steps to stop this, including an increase in the number of supervisors who review the work of each grader. Their presence cuts down the opportunities for bribery.

Today, we are proposing regulations to make meat grading more accurate and more uniform, and to provide consumers with more accurate information about the meat they buy.

I need to make a distinction here between meat grading and meat inspection. By law, our meat inspectors decide whether a cut of meat is wholesome and accurately labeled. Meat inspection is mandatory.

By contrast, meat grading is voluntary. The packer pays for Federal employees to grade the meat and stamp it for yield and for quality. You're familiar with the quality grades -- "Prime," "Choice," or whatever.

A government beef grader examines about 100 carcasses every hour. Many of his decisions are close calls, and every call means money to the meat packer.

(More)

If a grader dishonestly upgrades just one out of every ten carcasses from good to choice, for example, the packer could gain \$30 a carcass, or \$300 an hour, or \$2,400 a day, or \$12,000 a week -- all at the expense of consumers and producers.

Remember that we are talking about only one out of ten carcasses -- a percentage so close to the range of human error that it is often difficult to detect.

Under our proposal:

First, meat will be graded only in the plant where it is slaughtered and only as a whole carcass or side. This will eliminate the opportunities for fraud and error that occur when meat is graded after being cut up.

Second, a beef carcass will be graded only after it has been chilled enough that its marbling shows. This will end the practice of packers bringing a carcass back a second or third time in hopes of getting it upgraded. That practice increases costs, provides opportunities for fraud and increases pressures on graders to upgrade.

(More)

Third, we will require that 30 minutes elapse between the time that a carcass is ribbed and the time it is graded. This time sets grade factors, reduces the need for reevaluation and makes grading more accurate.

Fourth, requirements will be imposed to improve the accuracy of yield grading -- the system that tells the buyer how much meat a carcass will provide.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, under the Meat Inspection Act's labeling provisions, we propose that all beef and lamb sold at retail be marked or labeled with quality grade information. This is the grade most important to the consumer.

Under present practice, if a cut of meat falls short of the "choice" grade, the packer usually decides to leave it unmarked.

Under our proposal, the packer could have it marked with the appropriate grade -- "U.S. Good" for example -- or have it marked "U.S. Ungraded." All meats that are not graded would be so marked.

These changes will make certain that producers are paid for what they raise -- no more, no less -- and consumers pay for what they get -- no more, no less.

(More)

The changes should encourage production of leaner beef. But they do not deal with making grades reflect nutritional value. We must find ways to do this too.

At the present time, we are concerned with economic integrity. USDA grades have become the basis for pricing beef and lamb from the slaughterhouse through the supermarket. Grades are heavily used in advertising, promotion and labeling. Frequently, grocers use ungraded meat, or a mixture of graded and ungraded meat, and promote it in a way that misleads consumers who do not understand the difference between a government grade and a store label.

In other instances, meat is promoted in a way that causes consumers to confuse Federal inspection marks and grademarks. As a result, ungraded meat is sometimes overpriced.

Under these proposals, all meat would bear, from the time of slaughter, the appropriate grademark or the words "U.S. UNGRADED." These requirements would also apply, to imports. We believe these actions will substantially improve the honesty and integrity of the grading system and enhance public confidence in it.

(More)

We also must continue to build confidence in our system of meat and poultry inspection. We will soon have proposals to increase inspection efficiency and effectiveness.

I am announcing one such action today.

From now on the Agriculture Department will make public on a regular basis the names of those meat and poultry slaughter and processing establishments which are identified as "chronic problem plants."

Our meat and poultry inspectors cover more than seven-thousand plants. When inspectors find a contaminated product, they condemn it. But sometimes conditions that lead to contamination persist. Meat may be handled carelessly, or the plant may be less than sanitary.

Usually, all we have to do is advise the plant management to clean things up. But some plants consistently work as close as possible to the absolute minimum safety standards. They can do this because the process to withdraw inspection is interminable. When a plant sticks to that borderline despite warnings, we classify it as a chronic problem plant.

(More)

A little government sunshine should help prod chronic problem plants into line.

We expect you to keep on asserting your influence at the Agriculture Department, too. As I said at the beginning, we're not perfect. But we're trying, and the Administration is with us, not against us. We need your attention.

#

USDA 188-78

